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FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5226
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002865

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/25/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: POLITICAL TURMOIL IN DIWANIYAH PROVINCE: A
COMBINATION OF ELECTORAL POLITICS AND POOR PERFORMANCE

REF: BAGHDAD 2069

Classified By: Classified by Diwaniyah PRT Team Leader Michael Klecheski.
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: After a lengthy period of tranquility, politics have heated up sharply in Diwaniyah Province. The forging of national electoral coalitions in Baghdad reverberated in the province, but new coalitions in the Provincial Council (PC) appear to be driven by local considerations rather than national ones. The ongoing local hostility between the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist Trend will almost certainly prevent an alliance like the one those parties reluctantly forged in the Iraqi National Alliance (INA). The pre-election maneuvering led to efforts to oust Governor Salim Husayn Alwan (Dawa) and PC Chair Jubair Salman Khamat Awfi (Independent), both of whom are politically vulnerable given their low popularity. In the short term, it appears that the political machinations will lead to changes in PC committee chairmanships. One likely victim is the Sadrist Security Committee chair Kareem Zghair Ghazil Tayeh, who reportedly supported insurgent activities. The popular perception that the Dawa-led provincial administration is ineffective probably motivated PM Maliki to visit Diwaniyah October 8 to dole out pre-election largesse. END SUMMARY.

ISCI Goes on the Attack

¶2. (C) The initial hope that a new Dawa-run administration would perform better than its ISCI-led predecessor soon turned to disillusionment (reftel) Sensing an opening, ISCI fired the first salvo in early September, when it began distributing an open letter to the public blasting the current administration for failing to provide essential services. The ISCI-run government might not have been perfect, the letter argued, but it was far better than the incumbents in meeting citizens' needs.

¶3. (C) While the letter focused heavily on essential services, it also began raising the issue of security. Although Diwaniyah has not seen a significant uptick in violence, our conversations with political elites and with the public indicates that it had become increasingly concerned that the PC's two Sadrist members, Security Committee Chair Kareem Zghair and Second Deputy PC Chair Faras Wanas abd Mashkor were subverting Iraqi Security Force (ISF) efforts to combat the insurgents. Their positions allowed them a major voice on security issues. For example, the two reportedly pushed for the removal of local police chiefs that were tough on the insurgents and arranged for the quick release of those captured in anti-insurgent operations. ISCI, in its letter and its follow-on campaign, argued that its administration had been tough on the insurgency whereas the current administration was ceding the security field to the Sadrists.

Provincial Council Asserts Local Control

¶4. (C) In a curious first step on the security front, the PC voted on September 11 to remove the Provincial Chief of Police (PCoP), a hold-over from the ISCI-led provincial administration. Only the ISCI PC members voted against the measure. While the Interior Minister Bolani initially

rejected the PC's decision, he relented after the PC asserted its rights under the Provincial Powers Law to fire the PCoP for ineffectiveness and corruption with the Governor's support. The new PCoP is widely seen as a weak leader and manager, but one who will bend to the Governor's will.

PC Becomes the Battleground

15. (C) In the last few weeks, and as the national electoral coalitions began to gel, the political battleground widened. Coalitions began to gel, the political battleground widened. Acting quietly, ISCI began to forge a coalition against the Dawa-led provincial administration. What initially looked like it could become a majority in the 28-member PC eventually fell short, with the new coalition apparently containing 13 members: three from Allawi's Iraqi List party, three from Jafari's National Reform Trend, and two from the Dawa Iraq party, along with the five ISCI members. ISCI has not, however, publicized its support for this coalition. One well-placed PC member from the coalition told us its members hoped the Sadrists might join, mirroring the national Sadrist-ISCI alliance and giving the coalition a majority that could oust the Governor and PC Chair. A Sadrist-ISCI coalition did not happen locally, she continued, given the particularly intense historic hostility here between those two parties and further fueled by ISCI's recent statements against the Sadrists. (Comment: Another PC member provided a somewhat different version of this coalition, claiming it was not formed by and does not include ISCI. This is most likely an indication of the shifting nature of potential coalitions and the deal-making underway. End Comment)

16. (C) The maneuvering led to a political standoff which appears to have been resolved through a deal to change the make-up of the PC committees. The PC chose to forego a vote on the Governor and PC Chair at least until after the January

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elections. (It is unclear whether those hoping to oust these leaders backed off because they lacked the votes or because they realized the procedural difficulties involved.) In the short run at least, the PC will look to change six committee chairmanships, including those involving sectors focused on areas of voter discontent (electricity and education). Governor Salim described this as a shift from a more political to a more meritocratic PC. Most importantly, the PC will likely change the chairmanship of the Security Committee, removing the Sadrist who now holds that position. The Sadrist (and alleged JAM collaborator-facilitator) PC Deputy Chair Faras Wanas, however, is to retain his position, potentially giving that party at least some continued influence over security issues. The PC was to make these adjustments in PC committees and chairmanships by October 13, but pushed them off for more than a week, indicating that more political inveigling is underway.

Maliki Brings The Goods

17. (C) Dawa continues to worry that its administration's performance will affect the vote in the January elections. PM Maliki visited Diwaniyah October 8 and met with the PC, with leading tribal sheikhs, and visited the main university.

During his visit, he announced that the GoI would pay USD fifty million to war victims in the province. A day later, Governor Salim announced that his administration would supply containerized units to a number of schools in the province lacking in infrastructure and grant funds to Diwaniyah's soccer team. This announcement during Maliki's visit reflects the importance attached to the issue by the administration and the PRT has been barraged with requests to improve school buildings or construct new ones.

18. (C) The Governor told the PRT a few days later that Maliki's visit had been a success and "a vote of confidence in my administration." One prominent PC member sympathetic to Dawa, however, told us the visit was hastily and poorly organized and did little to strengthen the party's popularity. "The way it was organized, the visit was useless," our PC interlocutor commented. Another emotional interlocutor said that his State of Law Coalition members were disappointed Maliki did not meet with them separately, preferring a visit to the university and then returning to

Baghdad. Members of the public with whom the PRT spoke had a jaundiced view of the visit, seeing it as a pre-election propaganda effort.

¶9. (C) Meanwhile, the campaigning continues to heat up. A leading ISCI member Hakim Hamid al-Khuzai recently blasted the incumbent provincial administration for its handling of essential services. On the other hand, Sheikh Nabil Sakban, an important tribal leader, told us of his ambitious plans to campaign for Maliki throughout the province and in neighboring provinces in the period ahead. He acknowledged that Dawa's popularity is down but expressed confidence that the PM will perform well in the elections in the south. Other parties are beginning to reach out to the voters; one reportedly is offering grants to graduate students at the university in exchange for their support.

Comment

¶10. (C) Diwaniyah is among the predominantly Shi'a provinces in the south that make up a key battleground between the two rival Shi'a-led coalitions in the upcoming national elections. As part of the State of Law ticket, Dawa scored well in the January 2009 provincial election, but might not capitalize on the anti-incumbent gains it made at the time. Maneuvering in the PC could improve matters somewhat in terms of government performance) forcing clearly unqualified committee chairs out) but political turmoil could also further stymie that body's work. From the PRT's perspective, the most notable step forward in the short term would be the (likely) removal of the incumbent PC Security Committee Chair, a Sadrist who appears to have helped the insurgents.

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